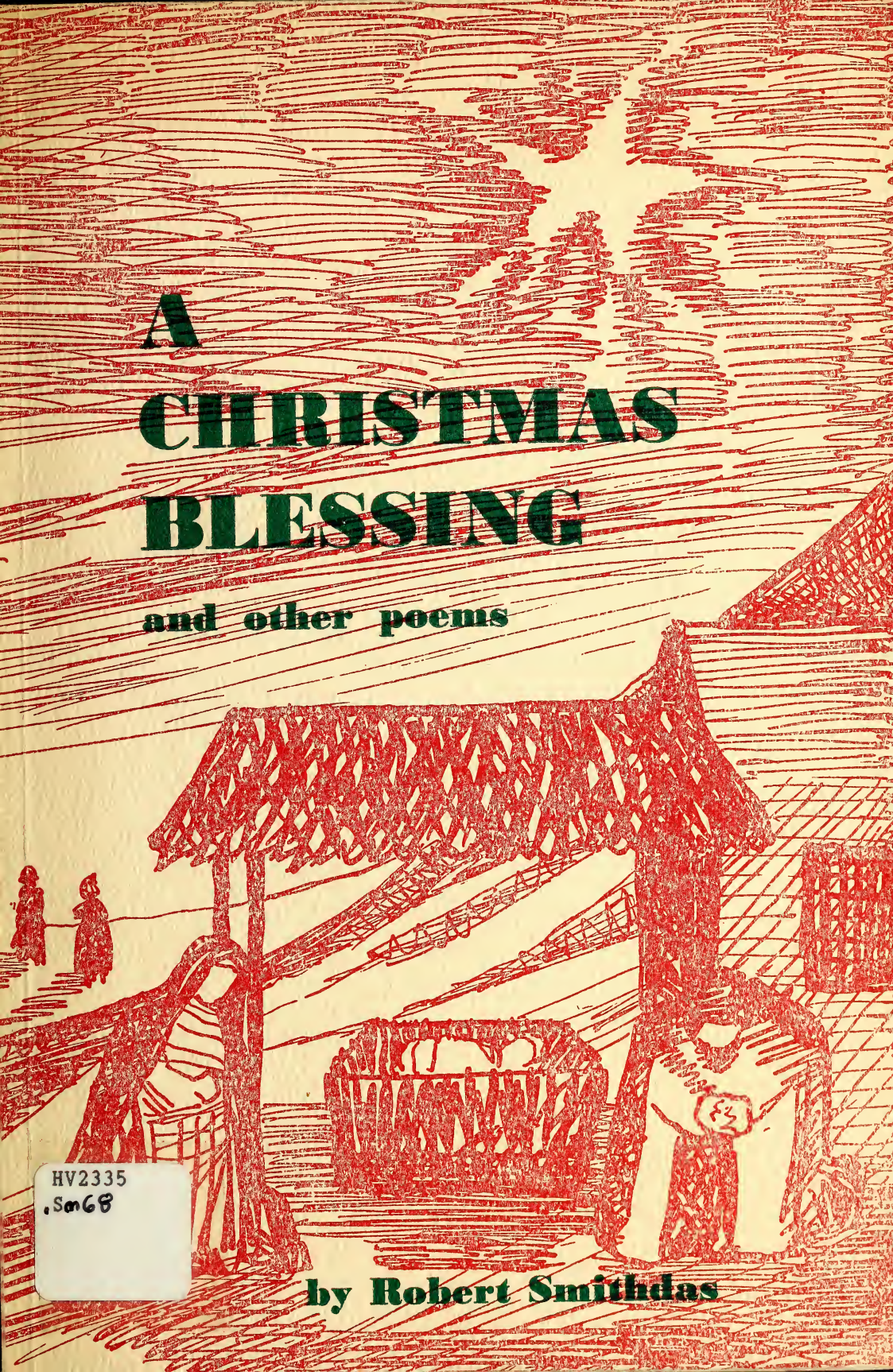
A CHRISTMAS BLESSING

and other poems



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by Robert Smithdas

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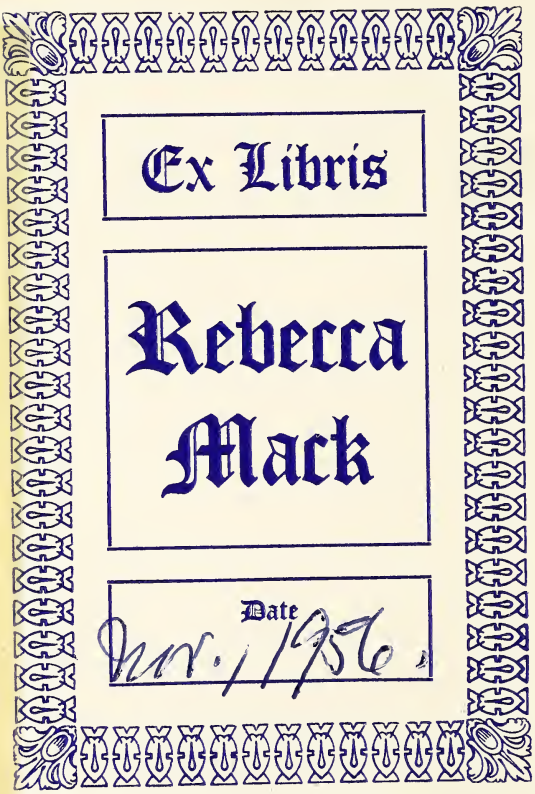

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A CHRISTMAS BLESSING and other poems

by

ROBERT SMITHDAS

vol. 2

in the series, "There is a Silver Lining"

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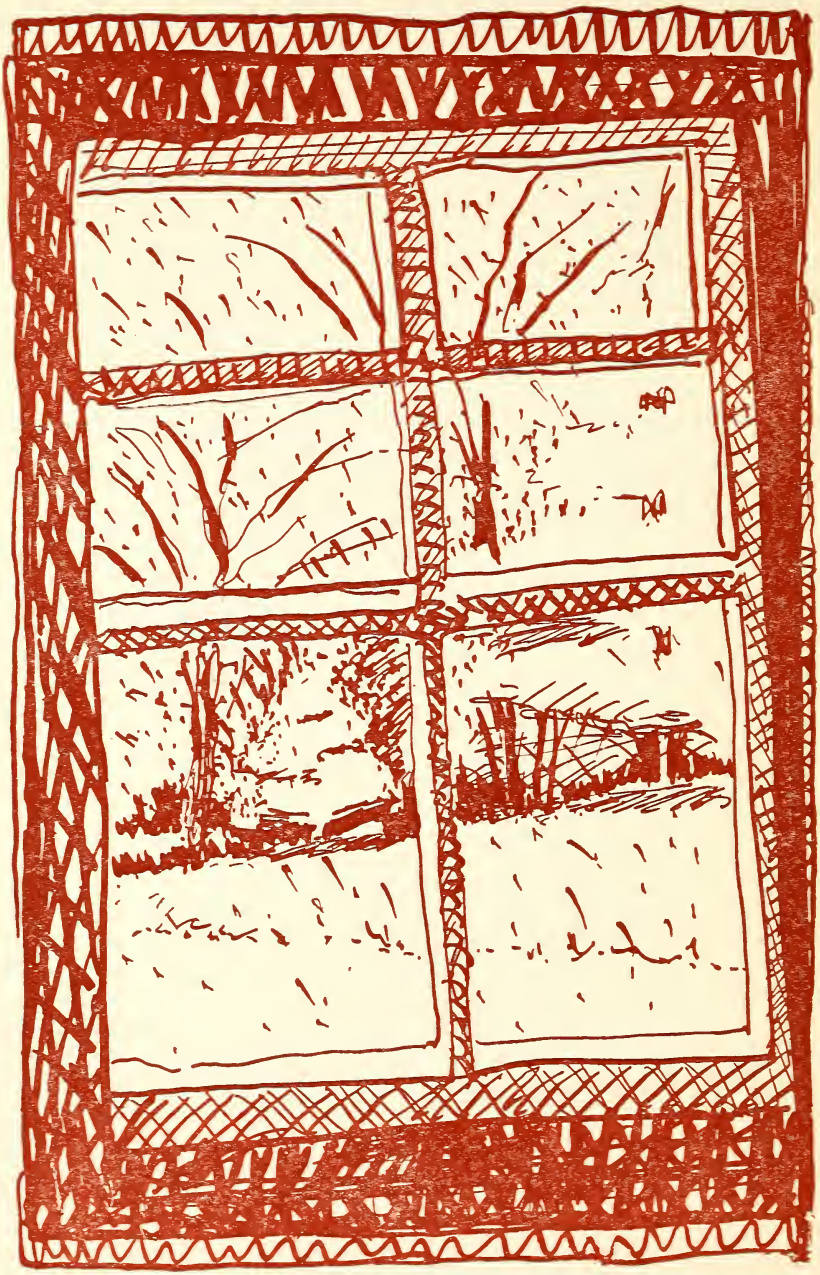
ROBERT J. SMITHDAS

counselor to the Community Relations Department of the Industrial Home for the Blind and permanent secretary of the I. H. B. League

DEDICATION . . . TO THE MANY KIND FRIENDS who have made my work, and the work of the Industrial Home for the Blind, possible.

R. S.



Snowflakes

When I was a child, before the world became dark to me, I used to love snowstorms. I would stand beside a window, watching the snowflakes fluttering down like white petals from cloudland flowers, silently hiding the naked earth and covering up its scars. It was a beautiful sight to see, and one which I have never forgotten.

Gently the snowflakes fall,
Fragile and thin and light—
Like a soft silver pall.
Gently the snowflakes fall
And muffle the world and all
In winter robes of white.
Gently the snowflakes fall—
Fragile and thin and light.

A famous painter once declared that one could find beauty and design in ugliness, music and harmony in discord, if one only sought them out. Even without the glory of light and color, or the changing symphony of sounds that fill life's golden hours, I still find my days charged with adventure and romance. There are those moments of depression and melancholy which assail all of us, but they are only temporary moods. What I find most difficult to express in poetry is the hidden happiness to be found in every unexplored day.

Soliloquy

Remember me when you see lovely things
Or hear enduring music. I, too, recall
The joyous songs and colors of this Earth;
But now my eyes are closed, my ears are sealed,
And only the soft whispers of my soul
Disturb the silent darkness of my days.
Here in the dark I build a world of dreams
From living essences: my fingers trace
The fragile beauty of a full-blown flower,
The placid kindliness of wood and stone,
And the warm smiles of cherished friends who share
Life's changing seasons as they come and go.
Pity me not that light no longer fills
These eyes with shapes of suns and moons and stars,
And crisp young blossoms from an April field;
Nor that the birds no longer sing to me
Their gay cascades of gladness from blue heights,
Where all the voices of the winds are hushed.
I know the joys of full and active days—
The task well done, the goal I sought attained;
The keen delight of knowing that my deeds
Span future years, and bring to those who share
The desire for fuller living I have known,
The strength of faith, bright hopes for happiness.

Hidden away in some dark corner of consciousness, waiting to be revived by some fortuitous incident or thought, there are always memories we believed had been forgotten. Suddenly they come to life again, with all the vividness of their original reality, and we find it difficult to renounce them. All of us have experienced this peculiar sensation, even though it may not have been caused by a book of verse, a rosebud, or the memory of a close friendship.

Nostalgia

Today I found a rosebud pressed between
The pages of a book of verse we shared;
Its petals were still red, its stem still green,
And somehow its fresh fragrance had been spared.

I held it tenderly with gentle fingers
Before I hid it carefully apart,
Wishing that you could know how one rose lingers
Here in the sheltered garden of my heart.

While reading a charming story, woven about the life and works of St. Francis of Assisi, I came upon a beautiful description of evening vespers in an old Italian city. It was one of those unforgettable scenes that an inspired writer sometimes creates with such startling vividness; and the haunting picture stirred my own imagination so forcibly that I determined to capture its essence in verse. It was the first of my poems which ever appeared in print, shortly before my twentieth birthday.

Vespers

Heard ye the bell at evening vespers tell
The hour to prayer, that moment of contrite breath
When over all the habitations of men there dwells
A reverence so deep it mocks the name of death:
Heard ye its voice?

The peasant bows his head in sweet repose,
His labors done; and on his visage sere
The shadow of grace rests, like a spirit that knows
There is a simple faith abiding here
That does rejoice.

A child kneels where the constant breeze reveals
Its youthful form; and in its tiny hands
It holds a cross of twigs. The dusk conceals
Its face, pointing toward Eastern lands,
Silent and still.

O rising Star, that journeys from afar,
Hereafter in the dark encircling night,
Let your eternal beacon beam where still there are
Such quiet souls and scenes: let your pure light
Shine where it will.

Helen Keller has won the hearts of people everywhere; she has been praised for her unique accomplishments, admired for her indomitable courage and boundless enthusiasm. It was the story of Helen Keller's life and achievements, more than any other influence, which inspired me to dream of a college education and subsequent success in some chosen field of work. Little wonder, then, that I deemed myself greatly honored when—as part of our Founder's Day celebrations—I was requested to recite the following poem at a ceremony dedicating the beautiful sunken garden at Burrwood to one of the world's most beloved women.

Tribute to Helen Keller

God said, "Let there be light": and in her soul
The flame of faith was kindled into fire,
Illumining her shadowland of days
With dreams of rainbows hidden in the hearts
Of flowers and friends to whom she gives her love.

Against the chiming crystal of her life
Love's silver hammers play their sweetest song:
And in the richness of its melody
Her spirit finds the glory of the years
And touches the world's heart with tenderness.

During my schooldays at Perkins School, Watertown, Massachusetts, I fell in love with the murmuring pine which grew near the Beechwood Gate. On warm afternoons in spring, I would climb into its branches, find a comfortable perch, and sit for hours. Light breezes fanning through the supple boughs made a sighing sound like the thrum of a violin; and, leaning back among the soft, fragrant tips, I would imagine the tree in a winter storm, or under the frosty light of a winter star.

To a Pine-Tree in the Winter

Crowned with the one bright star in your hair,
Spirit of storm and of snowy nights,
O Pine-tree that stands so green and fair
Throughout the winter's long twilights:
Are you endowed with some magic art
That these keening winds cannot parole
Your leaves decadent? Or is your heart
So stout that, beneath the white parasol
Upon your boughs, you only laugh
And cast it loose; while close at hand
The leafless maples sway and chaff
Under their frosted burdens, and
Though stronger by far than you, fall.
You are the king of Nature's monarchs, seen
By all your supple grace—oh, Evergreen!
If ever a tree was worthy, it has been
Your fortune to be placed above them all.

While I was a patient in a Brooklyn hospital several years ago, one of the books I read during my convalescence was the gospel according to St. John. I was especially fascinated by the story of the Christian miracles; and when I had finished reading it for the second time, I felt an urgent desire to express my feelings through some happy, creative medium. Remembering how most of us have recourse to the Divine Physician for help and guidance during our hours of necessity, it seemed natural for me to turn to poetry, the language of the heart and of the soul.

The Wonderful Physician

There was a great Physician, ages past,
Well-known within the land of Galilee,
Who had the magic power to set free
The human body from those ills which cast
Their shadows on our lives. He cured the blast
Of fever in the palsied limb and mind;
He gave prismatic vision to the blind,
And made the halt and lame to walk at last.

The Man of Seven Sorrows died in pain,
Crowned with sharp thorns, His healing hands
thrown wide
Against the sunset crest of Calvary.
But now He walks the earth eternally,
A Spirit of hope to heal us, and to guide
Our own hearts back to faith and love again.

The trill of a bluebird's song on a crisp spring morning; a yellow crocus peeping through dull, brown leaves—these broken shards of memory still come back to me from the days of my childhood. They seem insignificant, trifling things, until one fuses them together in the crucible of imagination.

Solstice

Last night the world was white with frost,
With not a single sign
To show that winter's curse would end
With spring's soft anodyne.

But when I rose at break of day
I heard a bluebird sing,
And found a crocus at my door—
The calling-card of Spring.

I was still in my junior year at St. John's University when I composed this sonnet for John Regan, one of my classmates and an old friend of mine. John was engaged to Frances Maas, a lovely girl whom he later married. One can scarcely imagine my pleasure when this poem appeared in The Florida Magazine of Verse; I was delighted to be able to present a copy to the young couple shortly before their wedding.

Sonnet to Frances

Should Springtime never come to earth again;
If flowers never bloom; if trees stand bare;
If Winter holds dominion all the year,
And hides the smiling sun with mist and rain,
Still will there be eternal summer here
Within my heart, when I remember days
Spent in your happy company, and ways
Enchanted with your magic atmosphere.

Your virtues are too great for me to praise.
I will not count them. But if this green earth
Became a desert region, with no hearth
To shelter me, still would I find a place
Of refuge in your smiles, love and care,
And find secure contentment waiting there.

Flowers have become symbolic of all the finer expressions of human nature; there is scarcely a single blossom that does not represent some intimate emotion. "Those who love the beauty of flowers," says an old Chinese proverb, "also know the language of the heart."

A Bouquet

In an old-fashioned garden,
Sparkling with silver dew,
I thought of happy friendships,
And gathered these flowers for you.

Rosemary for remembrance;
Pansies for joyous thoughts;
Roses for heart's devotion,
And blue forget-me-nots.

I bound them all together,
One spray of scented flame,
Each blossom glowing, whispering
Softly an old friend's name.

Each time I visit my home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I rediscover familiar objects which remind me of my mother—a tiny angel under the Christmas tree; an old teapot; a rosebush that she planted in the summer garden years ago. They are similar to other objects I have seen in countless places, and yet they are so intimately different; her hands have touched them and somehow given them a special personal quality. They stir my memory and bring back poignant recollections of the tenderhearted woman who gave me birth and life.

Home-Thoughts of My Mother

The house is full of her. In every room
I sense her presence moving everywhere—
A quiet radiance, and a dim perfume,
That haunt the darkest corner of the stair.
This is the vase her fingers once caressed
So fondly as she filled its heart with flowers;
Here is the missal that her warm lips pressed
In times of joy or melancholy hours.

She is not here; and yet she seems to be
A living part of these familiar things,
As if her soul had spanned Eternity
To hover close to me on viewless wings;
Guarding me still, and smiling as I touch
These souvenirs she once had loved so much.

Christmas is a season of tenderness and joyousness, a festival of beautiful old traditions and happy hearts. And almost as old as Christmas itself is the kindly Irish greeting of the Yuletide, "God bless this house." Touched by the charming sincerity of this ancient greeting, I was inspired to make a Christmas blessing of my own, for my friends and those who are dearest to me.

Christmas Blessing

God bless this house this holy night of nights:
Let there be room for only love and laughter;
May all old sorrows fade, and new delights
Brim every heart and ring from every rafter.
God bless you all, and may the dreams you treasure
Bring happiness; for once a tiny Boy
Beheld these same bright winter stars with pleasure,
And smiled because the world was His first toy.
The Star of Bethlehem has waned away,
Yet still the bells sing, like a silver spinet,
Their old familiar blessing; and they say:
"God bless this house and all who dwell within it."

Every artist wonders whether his work will have continuity, whether it will survive the span of his lifetime and still bring happiness and beauty to others. This thought has often occurred to me while composing poems of my own; for even one spontaneous echo of the heart may find an enduring place in the hearts of future generations.

A Wish

Beneath my feet, wherever I may go,
I tread upon the dust of countless ages
Without a thought of what great heritages
The passing years have gleaned and laid so low
That now they are but dust and memory.

Oh, what I wish to be remembered by,
When I have passed into my last sunset,
Is one brave song that men will not forget—
A simple, heartfelt tune that will not die
When I am only dust and memory.